

THE
HOUSE OF
ONE THOUSAND
EYES

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For my children
Madeleine, Dallas, Samuel, and Harrison

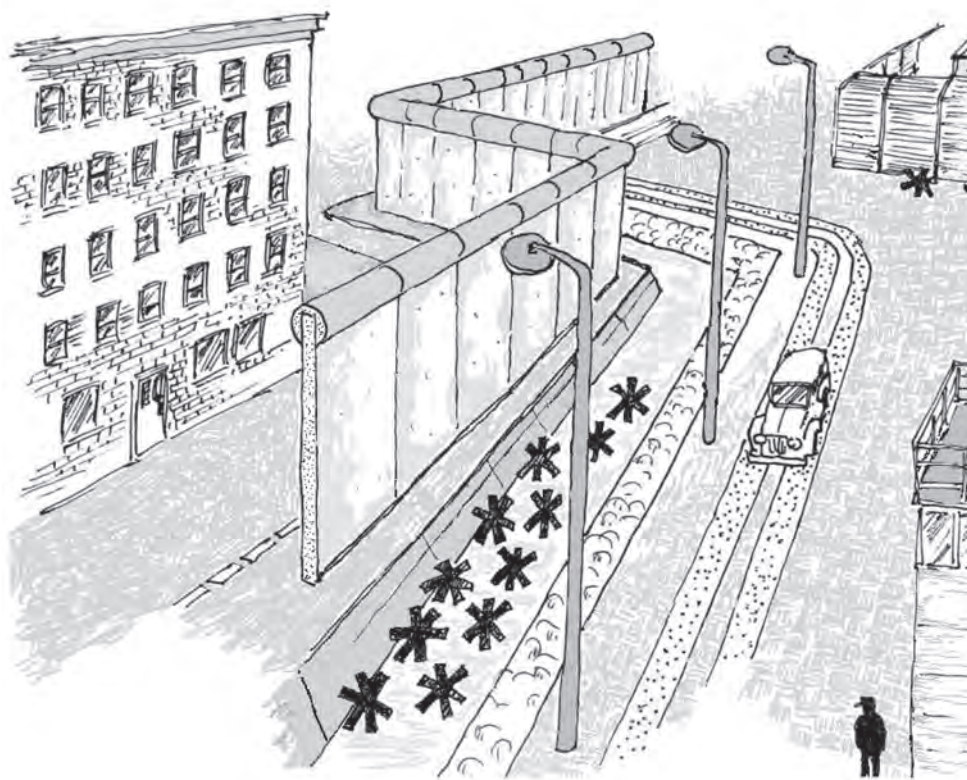
I've been in a place where what was said was not real, and what was real was not allowed, where people disappeared behind doors and were never heard from again, or were smuggled into other realms.

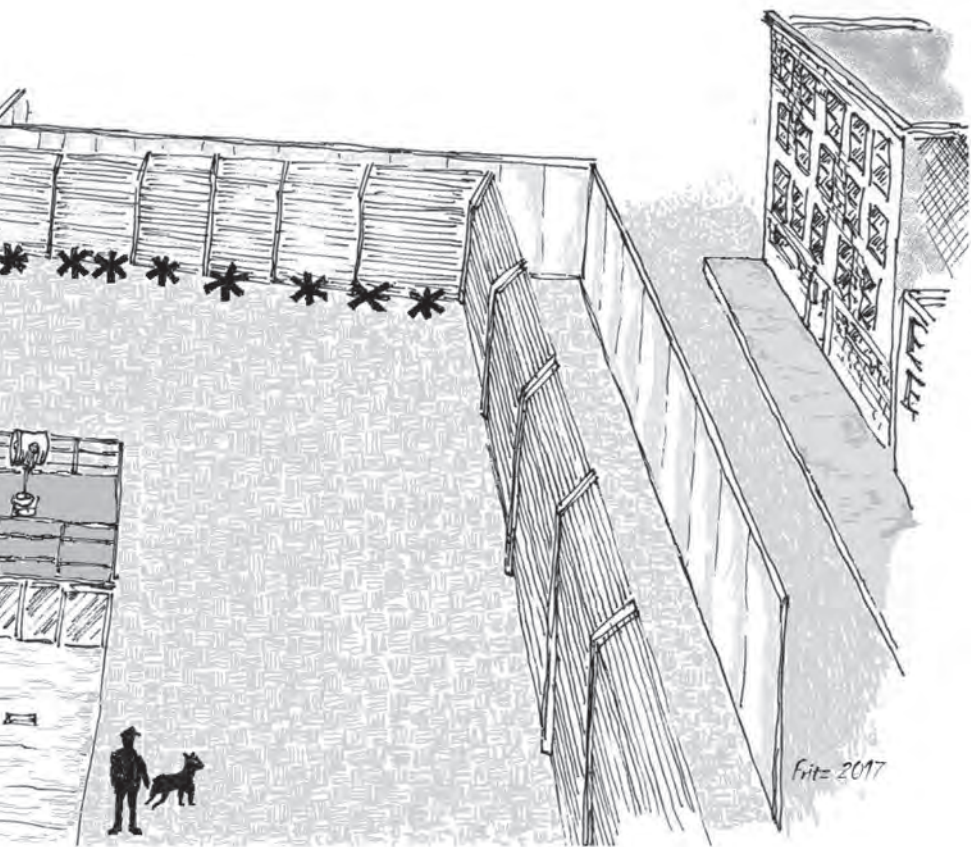
— Anna Funder, *Stasiland*

Where five or six are gathered together, one of them is a Stasi informer.

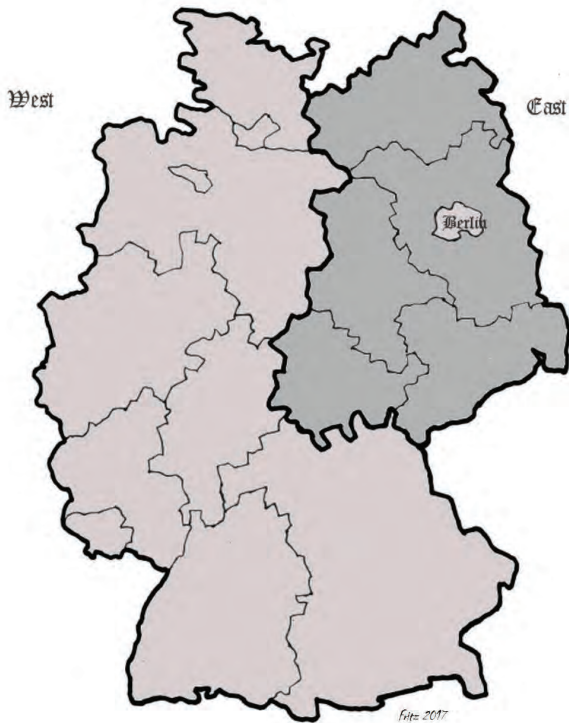
— Peter Schneider, *Berlin Now: The City After the Wall*

THE BERLIN WALL

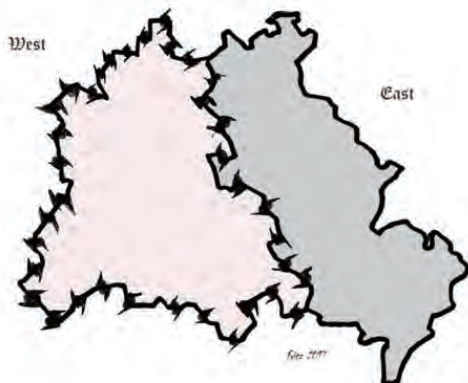




Germany 1983



Berlin



PREFACE

In 1983, when *The House of One Thousand Eyes* takes place, Germany was divided into two countries: the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany, and the German Democratic Republic, also known as the GDR or East Germany. It was the time of the Cold War. After the Second World War, West Germany had become a capitalist democracy, allied with the United States and Western Europe (“the West”); East Germany was a socialist country aligned with the Soviet Union. The city of Berlin was in a unique situation. Although located within the GDR, the city, because of its symbolic importance as the nation’s capital, was also divided into eastern and western zones. West Berlin essentially became an island of capitalism in a socialist sea.

While East Germany’s formal name was the German *Democratic* Republic, there was no democracy there. The GDR was a totalitarian regime, sometimes a brutal and repressive

PREFACE

one, and East Germans tried to leave the country by any means possible. Before 1961, the easiest exit route was within Berlin; from the eastern zone of the city, all you needed to do to enter the West was board a train.

In response, East German authorities built a wall around West Berlin, ostensibly to keep out the “destructive influences” of Western culture and values, but in fact to prevent East Germans from escaping to the West. In the early morning of August 13, 1961, one hundred and sixty kilometers of barbed wire went up in a matter of hours. The Wall grew into an imposing concrete structure complete with watchtowers, dogs, armed guards, and lights so bright they could be seen from space. Families were divided, and people could no longer cross freely between the two zones of the city. East Germans were only permitted to travel to other communist countries.

BERLIN,
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
1983

CONTROLLING THE LEAKS

For Lena Altmann, every Sunday felt like the first day of summer vacation after a long, hard year of straight lines and wrong answers. Sunday was the day she made the trip across Berlin to visit her Uncle Erich in the neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg.

There were many significant Erichs in the Better Germany, but in Lena's life her uncle was the most important one. He was a writer; he knew what it was like to make up places in his head and live in them as if they were real. For the rest of the week, Lena lived with his sister, Sausage Auntie—six days that felt like a year.

Be grateful for Sausage Auntie, Mausi. She gave you a home when you lost yours.

But today was Sunday, and Lena was strolling down an uneven sidewalk with her uncle, trying to control vanilla ice cream on a mid-September afternoon. If she could stay ahead of it, she could

keep the runnels of sweet cream from reaching her hands and making them sticky.

Every time Lena visited her uncle's neighborhood, she felt as if she needed a passport. The roads were narrow and full of potholes. The buildings were smaller and older than the ones where she lived, and on the main street where they walked, the walls were only painted to the top of the first story.

"See?" Erich crouched down. "It looks fine from this angle. Volvo level. That's what the dignitaries see from their car windows when they pass in their motorcades." He was frowning.

"It's not true," Lena said. "They just ran out of paint."

"On every building?"

"Your ice cream is melting," she said, and he stuck out his tongue and licked the ice cream right off his hand.

Lena liked his neighborhood because there were trees, and there was something about trees that felt solid and dependable, and a bit wild.

"Have you thought of a name yet for your made-up world?" Erich asked her.

"Yes. The *schrullig* world." Things that were *schrullig* were quirky, strange, outlandish.

Erich's eyes brightened, as if he'd spied a flower coming up through the pavement, or a street sign hanging upside down. Each time the two of them discussed her imaginary world, he would ask questions, and she would think up a new detail. That was how the world grew.

Lena was grateful to talk to her uncle about this. At seventeen, she should have outgrown make-believe—or so said Auntie. There were the doctors at the mental hospital to consider, the ones

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with pudding voices who used Lena's name over and over when they spoke to her, and gave her "a little something" to calm her down, and told her everything would be all right when it wasn't.

"Tell me about your world," Erich said.

She gave a supervisory lick to the perimeter of her cone. "There's a long row of orange space helmets. Only the important men sit under them, reading their newspapers and waiting for liftoff. But no one has told them which button to press to send them away."

"Into space?" Erich paid such close attention it was as if a pencil in his mind were taking notes.

"Maybe the men go to space," she said. "I don't know. They go away." Space wasn't the important thing. Away was. "And there's an office with big posters of imaginary lands, the kind that belong on a cake." Palm trees, white sand. Impossible places. "If you go into this office and say, 'I want to go to Coconut Island,' the lady will give you a ticket and that's that. You pack your bag and go." That wasn't exactly the truth. The posters were of Rügen Island and Prague, places Germans were allowed to go. Sometimes Lena embellished to make herself feel better.

They arrived at the park, which was busy with couples picnicking, parents chasing little boys who'd just learned to walk and looked like gunslingers from the Wild West, old ladies with stump-ankles dragging small fat dogs behind them. When a couple gave up one of the benches, Erich and Lena sat down.

Erich finished his ice cream and lit a cigarette. "We could travel to the land of icing where the maps are made of chocolate."

"Yes!" Lena loved his imagination. "There's also a bookstore in my world, with the authors you talk about all the time." Her uncle liked to read Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, Émile Zola—authors

whose books were hard to get hold of. “And your books are in there too, Uncle. A row of Erich Altmanns.”

“Ah. Nobody buys them.” He blew a line of smoke into the air.

“No, silly. They’re available, any one you want. I could buy you one of your own books and bring it home.”

“Bring it home?” Erich frowned at the scratched wooden bench. “I thought your *schrullig* world was made up.”

“It is.” But also it wasn’t. Lena pushed too hard on the ice cream with her tongue and some of it ran down the side of the cone. That was a mistake. *Things are getting out of control. Your hands will end up sticky.*

She wasn’t sure how to explain this aspect of the *schrullig* world to her uncle. She couldn’t even explain it to herself without making the wasps in her head come back. *Don’t make the wasps come back, Mausi.* If Auntie knew, she’d tell the doctors. No sudden movements. No sharp edges. Auntie said it was important that Lena’s life remain tranquil and uncomplicated. If the doctors got involved again, they might not let her out of the hospital.

Auntie saved you. Yes, she did. But the prize was that now she got to live with Auntie so Auntie could straighten her out—for the rest of her life.

“So how do you enter your world, then?” Erich said. “Usually in imaginary worlds there’s a portal or a cupboard or something.”

“There’s a door,” Lena said. “But you need to be a member to get in.”

“Could I be a member?”

Lena grew serious. “No.”

“How about a guest?”

“No,” Lena said again. “There are no guests.”

“Not even if you accompanied me?”

“Not even then.” Lena finally reached the cone. The leaks had been controlled. “There are oranges in my world—all year round, not just at Christmastime, and not the Cuban ones. And there are bananas, as many as you like.”

“Now who’s being the silly one?” Erich poked her in the arm.

Bananas were a luxury in the Better Germany. In Magdeburg, where Lena had grown up, they’d only been available twice a year. The green Cuban oranges—when they were in stores—were chewy and tough to eat.

“In Narnia there was Turkish delight,” Erich said, “but you mustn’t eat it because the more you eat, the more you want, and then you can’t think of anything except Turkish delight, and you’ll never want to leave.”

Lena considered that. She wouldn’t mind living in her made-up world, but only if she found the button that would send the men and their newspapers away forever. “Have you talked to Auntie yet? About me coming to live with you?”

Erich’s cigarette was suddenly the most important thing in the afternoon. He sucked on it. He blew smoke. He studied the orange end burning between his yellowed fingers. “Your aunt Adelheid is very devoted to you.”

You’re her mission. Auntie believed that Lena was broken and she could fix her. It was another one of those things that was both true and not true at the same time.

Erich always spoke about his sister as if he were handling a sharp knife. “If I push too hard, she won’t let you come here on Sundays anymore. She’ll think I’m trying to take you away from her.”

If only.

They walked, they chatted, and, too quickly, the air grew cooler and it was time to return to Erich's apartment. The afternoon was coming to an end.

Erich lived in one of the old gray buildings that was still pock-marked from the shelling during the Second World War. It wasn't a full-comfort apartment, like Auntie's. There was no central heating, and the bathroom was in the stairwell, used by many other people. Lena climbed the stairs, imagining the building was her home. What would it be like to live there? She would have to share the bathroom with strangers, someone waiting at the door while she tried to poop. *You'd get used to it. You could hum, or bring a magazine. You could make a sign that said "Occupied" so no one would bang on the door.*

Inside, the apartment was cold. The walls were lined with cracks that had blackened over time. There was the houseplant, looking as if it had shrunk since she'd last seen it, one step away from dead. There was Erich's typewriter on a small desk beside the window, because he said writers and windows went together like bratwurst and mustard. Lena sat on a stained armchair and Erich fetched her a Vita Cola. Another Sunday-afternoon treat—Sausage Auntie never bought Vita Cola. Lena took the first sip, letting the bubbles burst inside her mouth and savoring the lemon tang.

She imagined Erich at his desk, a cigarette in one corner of his mouth, eyes squinting at the smoke, dreaming lives out of thin air.

"He's lazy, that's what," Auntie often said about her brother. "Sits around all day in his underclothes and stares out the window."

"He's a writer, Auntie," Lena would reply. "That's what they do."

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On the table was a copy of *Der Spiegel* from last year, with a beautiful woman on the cover. Lena stroked the smooth paper as if it were a cat. *Der Spiegel* was a Western magazine. Anyone seen reading it would automatically be suspected of decadence or wrong opinions, and then they might get a card in the mail asking them to meet with the secret police for an instructive chat. The thrill of such disobedience took Lena by surprise. “Who is she? On the cover?”

“That’s Marilyn Monroe, an American actress.”

Lena opened the magazine, even though part of her worried that Auntie was watching somehow, waiting to take it away from her. She flipped through the pages until she found more pictures of the actress. “She’s very glamorous.” Such curly hair. Dresses Lena had only seen on Western television, at her friend Danika’s house. Red lipstick. Lena was not allowed to wear lipstick because Auntie didn’t want anyone to think she worked in a textile factory.

“She’s also dead,” Erich said. “Suicide—a drug overdose. See?” He flipped back to the magazine cover: *The Immortal Dead*. “It happened over twenty years ago.”

Lena stuck her hands into the long front pocket of her sweater to keep them warm. How could it be colder in Erich’s apartment than it was outside? Why would a famous actress from America want to kill herself? “Can I keep this?”

“I’ve already promised it to my next-door neighbor. Anyway, Adelheid would crap her knickers if she caught you with that magazine. Maybe just cut out one picture.”

Erich went to fetch scissors, but the blades were so dull they didn’t cut.

“*Scheiss Osten*,” Lena muttered. Shitty East. Everyone said that

when they couldn't get what they needed or something didn't work the way it was supposed to—everyone except people like Auntie. Lena folded the edges of the picture and licked them. Then she tore, a little at a time.

A loud knock at the door startled her so badly she ripped the picture. Her hands trembled as she shut the magazine and hid it behind her back.

Erich called, "Who is it?" Lena had never heard him sound so cold.

"It's Steffi, for God's sake. Open up."

Steffi was Erich's neighbor from downstairs. Lena tried not to make a face, but she must have, because Erich said, "Don't worry, she won't stay."

He rose to open the door, and Lena prepared herself for a storm of heels and gum-chewing and hands that moved like crazy caged birds. It took a moment before she realized Steffi hadn't crashed into the room in her usual way. Instead, a low and urgent conversation was taking place at the door.

". . . not safe. They're coming. I don't know when."

"I'm not afraid of them," Erich said.

If he's not afraid, why is his voice rising? Why is he rubbing his hands on his pants like they're dirty?

"Then you're a fool." Steffi's voice. "At least protect yourself. We've talked about this."

"Fine, fine. Come in then."

Steffi's angry red boots clipped into the room.

Erich disappeared into his bedroom and Steffi stood there with her short black hair, shorter than Erich's shoulder-length tangles. *No wonder he can't find a respectable job, Auntie would*

have said. Steffi looked around until her eyes fixed on Lena and then, “Oh. *You’re* here.” *Snap snap* went her gum.

Lena forced a smile. She could hear Erich coughing in the other room, a long bout this time, one that would bend him over with a hand to his chest. He had been coughing ever since his work in the mines, though lately it seemed to be worse.

He emerged red-faced and wet-eyed, a stack of brown books in his arms. Lena recognized them as his writing notebooks. Normally he kept them hidden beneath his bed. When he handed them to Steffi, Lena wanted to run over and kick her in the shins.

“What are you doing?” she said to her uncle, but he didn’t answer.

Steffi glanced down at her full arms, eyebrows raised in a question.

“Take them to your place,” Erich said to her. “But not for long. They’ll come looking.”

They.

There was only ever one *They*: the State Security Service. That was the Stasi’s formal name, but everyone knew them as the secret police. And regardless of what Erich had said at the door, everyone was afraid of them. If you had a subversive thought or wrong opinion, if you made an off-color joke to the wrong person—even something as harmless as saying *Scheiss Osten*—you risked arrest, imprisonment, ruin. The Stasi were experts at destroying lives.

You didn’t just think that. Unthink it this instant. Where was the Wall? Not the real Wall—everyone knew where it was. The one in her mind. There, she could see it rising and she hurried to get on the right side. “Everything for the good of the People,” as the slogan went. There was an idea at stake, a Better Germany to create.

Naturally, with such a difficult task, there would be casualties.

“I’ll leave you,” Steffi said. The way she walked in her short red boots made the spindly houseplant lose another leaf. “I’ll be back in a *Schni* for the rest of them.” She shut the door behind her.

“Take your time,” Erich called, winking at Lena—but there was no fun left on his face.

Lena waited for the air to calm. “What if she reads them?” Those notebooks were not meant to be read by anyone. Erich had told her that the one and only time she’d asked.

“She won’t,” he said.

“She doesn’t like me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone.” Erich sat across from her, lit a cigarette, and blew out a stream of smoke. Lena watched his hands. They were strong and square, though the hand holding the cigarette was jittery. He had lost his left pinkie finger in a mining accident. He never spoke of how it had happened, but it must have hurt. She wondered if the missing finger made his typing come out crooked.

“Why is she taking your notebooks?” *Why her, and not me?* “What did she mean by ‘not safe’? Are the Stasi coming here? Are you in trouble?”

Erich leaned forward as if to tell Lena something important. She could see him weighing it out, the sides of his face shifting *yes, no*, and then he leaned back into *maybe* and said, “I’m just being cautious. I would have given the notebooks to you, but—your job. If anything ever happened and they put pressure on you. You know.”

She knew. Lena worked as a night janitor at Stasi headquarters—the place Berliners called the House of One Thousand Eyes.

THE HOUSE OF ONE THOUSAND EYES

Working for the Stasi turned real conversations into chitchat about the weather or last year's football results at the World Cup. People didn't treat her the same way once they knew. They acted as if the thousand eyes were pollen, clinging to her hair or dress. Like she was a giant microphone, recording everything and then running back to headquarters with secret information about who was reading the wrong books or receiving packages from Western relatives.

If her parents hadn't died, she would never be working at a job like that. She had dreamed of going on in her education, perhaps to vocational training or extended secondary school. She'd wanted to be a nurse, or to work with children, before things had fallen apart. "I miss Mama and Papa."

"I know you do," Erich said. "I miss them too."

"Nothing's been the same since the accident." The accident at the freight car factory in Magdeburg had killed so many people. The news reporters had given it a name—*tragedy*—but it was like trying to stuff a thunderstorm into a garden shed. There was no word big enough for that kind of sadness. "You want to know a secret?" she said, because all at once she was bursting with it.

"Tell me. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No, it's nothing like that."

"What about that one you collect bottles with? Didn't he buy you an ice cream once?"

Peter. "He's not my boyfriend." *He wishes he was*. No, he doesn't, Mausi. Stop saying that. "He just lives down the hall." A neighbor, like Steffi, but nicer. "No, it's a secret about my parents."

Erich brushed the hair out of his face, even though it wasn't in his face. His voice changed. "What kind of secret?"

“I’ve always wished they hadn’t died in an accident.”

“Of course you wish that.” Erich let out a long breath. “It’s normal.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Lena twisted the bottom of her sweater, embarrassed by what she was about to say. *You’ve got both feet in the conversation now. You may as well say it out loud.* “I wish it had been someone’s fault.” A crime with criminals; a mystery with a solution. It made her feel mean to say it, but it would have been so satisfying. Accidents weren’t like that. They happened. They were stories that had come to a sudden end for no reason at all, and the people left behind had to find some way to survive.

Erich tapped his cigarette in the already full ashtray, knocking butts onto the table—*Auntie would go wild*—and then rubbing the stump where his pinkie should have been. “Have you told this to anyone else?”

“No. Only you.” Lena shifted in her seat. What had she said wrong? Her mind raced, searching for something that might make it better. “Do you remember the *solyanka* Mama used to make whenever you came to visit?” It was Lena’s favorite soup.

His shoulders settled. “We used to soak our bread in it until it was mushy.”

“It tasted sweet. And sour. Both at the same time. Will I have to live with Auntie forever?” This was the big question. Lena couldn’t even look at Erich when she asked it. *I wanted to live with you.*

“One day you’ll be old enough to live on your own.”

“Auntie says I’m too simple.”

“Adelheid doesn’t know shit.” Erich clapped a hand to his

mouth in pretend horror at the bad word. He took her hands in his. “You’re always so cold. See? You couldn’t live here with me. We still heat the place with coal and there’s never enough.”

He stood up and looked out the window as if he were expecting someone. Then sat down. Then stood and drew the curtains. Then sat down. “Did someone tell you to say that? About the accident?”

“No. Why would anyone do that?” Oh. Her job. Not even her uncle trusted her. If only it would wash off. Even having a mechanic’s grease-stained fingers would be better than this. Everyone assumed she was a *Spitzel*—an informer. A spy.

The clock in the kitchen measured the moments between them that had somehow become awkward, and there were so few of them left before Lena had to go home for supper. She remembered the magazine behind her back. She pulled it out and finished extracting the photograph, and Erich repaired the rip with sticky tape that didn’t stick very well.

“You mustn’t show that to your aunt. If she finds out it came from me, she won’t let you visit anymore.”

“She’ll never know.” Lena smoothed the picture on her lap, then folded it and tucked it into her front pocket.

Erich glanced at the plant as if it were listening. “Do you still have a set of my keys?”

“Of course.”

“Good. My freezer might need defrosting. You never know.”

What? Was he going somewhere? Why in the world would he want her to do that? Well. His freezer was a prized possession, probably the most valuable thing in the apartment. Not everyone had a fridge with a freezer; they were expensive, and even if you could afford one, that didn’t mean the shops would have any.

Footsteps crunched up the stairs. There was a knock and Steffi said, “It’s me again.”

Lena reached for her uncle and hugged him goodbye for another week, memorizing his arms and the smell of him—tobacco, vanilla, ink. She held him so tightly she imagined breaking him in half and taking part of him home. And that was it—her daylong summer vacation was over.

Uncle Erich didn’t break in half. But the way he waved from the window when she looked up from the street filled her with a strange and terrible feeling. As if she might never see him again.